

FILMING FLORENCE

By Stephanie Daniels and Anita Tedder

The controversy surrounding the women's 800 metres of 1928 has been well documented. The Amsterdam Olympics marked the first time that women track and field athletes had been admitted to the Olympic Games. On Wednesday August 1st 1928, there were three heats of the 800 metres. Twenty-seven female competitors were entered, with the first three in each heat to progress into the final the next day. In all three preliminary rounds the world record was broken each time. In the final Lina Radke, from Germany, again lowered the record to 2 mins 16.8 and the first three finishers each bettered the world record set in the previous races. In 1928 these results were way ahead of anything women had previously achieved - yet this new Olympic women's event and any distances exceeding it were banned for women in the Games until 1960 as a consequence of this one race in Amsterdam. At the time, it was widely believed that this distance was too far for women and even dangerous. Negative press reports of the race upheld this view. British Olympic correspondent Sir Percival Philips submitted his report to the London Daily Mail, which appeared on Friday August 3rd, 1928. The headline read "Women Athletes Collapse - Fierce Strain of Olympic Race - Sobbing Girls". Sir Percival wrote that many women came to watch the race and that:

"For them, as for everyone else, the most sensational event of the day was another exhibition of sheer exhaustion by their sisters in the arena. Nine of them took part in the final of the 800 metres flat race (roughly half a mile) and it was not a pleasant sight."

During the three-year research for our book 'A Proper Spectacle' we searched for many of the world's oldest women Olympians. One of our quests was to find out from the women who were there in Amsterdam what the fuss was all about. We managed to find just two of these 800 metres competitors. One, Wilhelmina Duchateau of Holland, recently



died while the other, Australia's Edith Robinson, was feted during the Sydney Olympics. Edith repeatedly told us in her letters that she was only keeping herself going for the Games, but was 'going to enjoy all the dinners and fuss after years of being ignored'. When Edith died just two weeks after Sydney ended, and before we got our chance to meet and record her memories, we thought that the final competitor from the 800 metres had gone. Members of National Olympic Committees confirmed that their competitors in the race had died or they had lost contact with their athletes - including the United States.

Our web site www.olympicwomen.co.uk set up to promote the Centenary of Women in the Olympic Games and our book 'A Proper Spectacle' attracted interest and attention. Just after returning from Sydney, on October 6th 2000, we received an interesting email from the USA from a woman called Joan Pelland saying that she had stumbled across the web site and that her mother-in-law had competed for the US in the 1928 Olympics. Joan bought our book. When, some ten days later, Joan emailed us again to say that there was a photo of her mother-in-law, Florence McDonald, in the book, we were astonished. Florence was the very modern looking athlete, who stood out with her short bobbed hair, at the very end of the starting line of the FINAL of the 800 metres of Amsterdam 1928. We began to find out more about Florence.

Florence Elizabeth MacDonald (in Gaelic, Flora Elizie) was born on a farm on French Road, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia on October 28, 1909. Her great grandfather, Ronald (pronounced Ranald) and her great grandmother, Christina, came as children from South Uist in the Outer Hebrides, Scotland, to Cape Breton Island in the early decades of the nineteenth century. They were victims of the Highland clearances. The family was Gaelic-speaking and Catholic. Florence and her younger sister, Christina, lived on the farm with their father and great grandmother, Christina. Their mother, Mary Curry, died giving birth to a third child. Florence's father, Angus Ronald MacDonald, a farmer and a carpenter by trade but a Gaelic poet by avocation (his poetry was published in various local newspapers), remarried Mary MacNeil. They moved first to Sydney, Nova Scotia, in the late 1910's, and then on to Boston Massachusetts in the early 1920's. Angus became a U.S. citizen, thereby making his children US citizens.

It was in Boston USA that Florence's talent was discovered. She began running in the 'Scotch Games' which were held annually in Boston, but came into prominence in 1928 when she won the 50 yard junior dash championship at the New England A.A.U. games. Just a week later she ran a time trial at 880 yards under the direction of "Hiker" Joy and Coach Eddie O'Brien (strangely of the Boston Swimming Association) and covered the distance in 2m 29s. A remarkable performance for a first try. At the 1928 US Olympic trials for women at Newark, the 800 meter race was won in heats, and every heat winner smashed the American record for the distance. The first heat winner in the record-breaking 800 at Newark was Dee Boeckmann of St. Louis, who was clocked in 2m 33 4-5s, the second heat was won by Florence in 2m 36s while in the third heat Rayma Wilson, who stood on the mark before the gun sounded and shouted, "Here's the winner, boys," broke the tape in 2m 32 3-5s. Gene Mack sports cartoonist for the Boston Globe wrote:

'While this is pretty fast going for girls and betters the old American record of 2m 36 3-

Looking Over New England's Athletes in the Olympics

BY GENE MACK



5s set up by Marcelle Barkley, the times do not compare with the accepted world's record of 2m 26 3-5s held by Miss Lines of England. The Canadian championships at the distance this spring were won in 2m 30s. Miss MacDonald, however, is a comparative newcomer to the track game, particularly to distance running and it is probable that she will improve her work at the 800 very rapidly. It is easy to see then that this 18 year-old girl has unlimited possibilities and the Olympic games may find her at the top of her stride in the race which seems destined to one of the outstanding events on the Amsterdam card.'

On Friday August 3rd 2001, we travelled to the USA and interviewed and filmed Florence with the help of her son John Campbell, Joan and the residential home where 91year old Florence now abides. What a character she is - and she still remembers her trip to Europe most fondly, particularly her stay in Paris where she saw Maurice Chevalier sing. So what does the world's last survivor of this event say about the infamous Amsterdam 800 metres final?

Tape Transcript

Q: Could you have done better?

Florence: I was too dumb. I'd have won it. I'm sure I'd have passed them because at the end of the race I was as fresh as a daisy. I think people are better trained now. It's a funny thing. What people expect of you, you do. I let the Canadian girls beat me.

Q: Do you remember exactly what happened at the end of the race?

F: Nothing happened. There wasn't anything. It seems to me that we were as fresh when we finished as when we started.

Q: At the end of the race how did people react?

F: Kinda stupid. They expected the women to be exhausted and all that and of course when you expect people to do things they do things that you expect - and of course they weren't.

Q: What happened?

F: They were all lying down.

Q: Do you remember that?

F: Yes. I'll never forget it.

Q: Who was lying down?

F: Everyone at the end of the race.

Q: Did you lie down?

F: No.

Q: The newspapers said that all the women collapsed at the end of the race.

F (vehemently and with emphasis) That's not true.

Q: What was true?



F: It's true. It's a funny thing about human nature they do what people expect and the women they could have run another race. I think things are different now. Those girls could have run another race.

Q: So it's not true that the women collapsed?

F: No it was make believe. Well, if they expect you to collapse you collapse.

Q: Did you collapse?

F: No - but I didn't win! This collapsing business was a lot of nonsense.

These days, Florence struggles with her hearing and sight and we were unable to clearly ascertain quite what she meant about people's expectations that 'if they expect you to collapse you collapse.' She does say that the runners lay down at the end of the race though she herself didn't. Archive footage shows fourth place runner, Canada's Jean Thompson, falling at the finish. However, one thing is absolutely indisputable. The last surviving finalist of the 800 metres of 1928, Florence McDonald, clearly felt that she could have done better than her sixth place and what the newspapers said about the race was simply 'not true.'

'A Proper Spectacle - Women Olympians 1900-1936' plus other information about women Olympic pioneers can be found at our web site www.olympicwomen.co.uk

